Making a Buck On the Death Of a President

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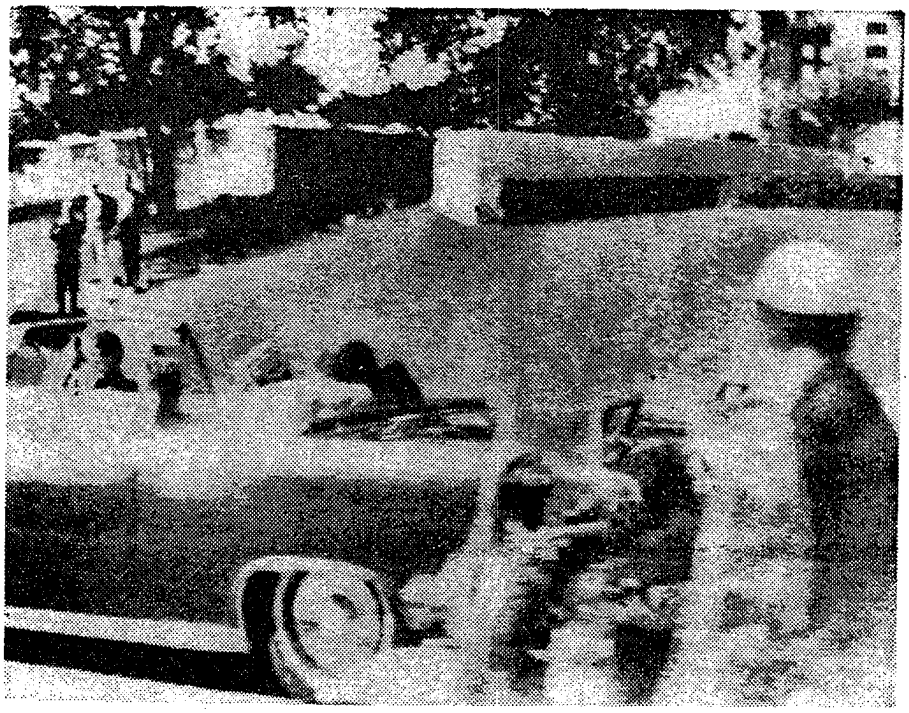
The books about . . .



. . . the assassination.

By CHERYL BENTSEN

HISTORY PROFESSOR David Wrone knows of 150 books about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

He uses the books in a University of Wisconsin class he teaches about political assassinations, and he notes with chagrin that their number has doubled since he first compiled the list in 1973.

The rash of new books, he said, includes a couple of dozen novels which deal with the subject in a style one reviewer calls "paranoid surrealism," blending fact and fiction with sensational results.

"Looking at these books," Wrone said, "I am struck in an overall sense by an impression that the American people have a genuine, critical heart. But I am also struck by the extreme shallowness, the exploitation and the perversion of the assassination and its investigation.

"There are responsible critics, of course, like Sylvia Meagher, who indexed the Warren Report's 26 volumes and wrote 'Accessories After the Fact.' There is no greed in people like that. But recently I've noticed an increase in irresponsible books, and what shocks me is the money they make."

★ ★ ★

Publishers agree that books on this subject—as well as those on the assassinations of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King—are proven money-makers.

"Where our books really move is on college campuses," said Judy Hilsinger of Bantam Books, which has published six assassination books. It printed the "Report of the Warren Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy," 80 hours after it was released. Last year, it published and heavily promoted Robert Sam Anson's book, "'They've Killed the President!': The Search for the Murderers of John F. Kennedy."

Almost all the books on Wrone's list, from Mark Lane's "Rush to Judgment" (1967) to former New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison's new novel, "The Star Spangled Contract," take issue with the Warren Commission's conclusion that Kennedy was killed by a lone assassin.

Some go about this business in a scholarly fashion, others are frantic in tone and casual with fact. But those that sell best fuel public suspicion that there has been a coverup of gigantic and possibly dazzling proportions.

But the broader public interest can be explained by looking at the latest national Harris survey which found that 65 per cent of the American people are convinced the assassination was not the act of one individual, but rather part of a larger conspiracy.

And that doubt, which some say has developed into justified national paranoia, continues to provide a very profitable market for book publishers and movie-makers.

Whatever your favorite conspiracy theory

starts approaching you with others. Any number of things have been offered to us, but we've turned them down.

"Unless I come across something that sheds a whole new light on the assassination, I would be inclined to wait and see what happens with the new hearings. One hopes finally this time there will be an explanation. After this happens, yes, there will be any number of hurry-up books and then maybe someone will write a thoughtful and important book. If the hearings fail, then the books will probably continue until resolution."